

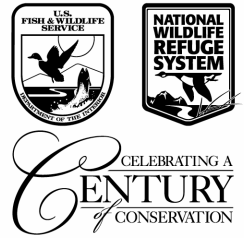
News Release

National Wildlife Refuge System

A.R.M. Loxahatchee NWR
10216 Lee Road
Boynton Beach, FL 33437-4796
Phone: 561/732-3684
Fax: 561/369-7190

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Contact: Betsy Lordan (202) 219-7499

Join the Centennial Celebration at a National Wildlife Refuge Near You

Events celebrating a century of conservation get underway in less than a month

On March 14, we celebrate the 100th anniversary of a unique American treasure: The National Wildlife Refuge System.

One hundred years ago, with little fanfare, then-President Theodore Roosevelt established tiny Pelican Island, off the east coast of Florida, as the nation's first federal bird reserve.

At the time, herons, egrets, spoonbills and pelicans were being slaughtered indiscriminately because their feathers were in high demand as fashion accessories. An otherwise obscure thicket of mangroves, the 5-acre Pelican Island became a sanctuary and a national symbol for conservationists.

Theodore Roosevelt went on to establish 51 more federal bird reserves and four national game preserves, and they became the forerunner of our modern National Wildlife Refuge System.

Today, that system is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which is part of the U.S. Department of the Interior. The system is the only network of federal lands dedicated specifically to wildlife conservation. It includes 540 National Wildlife Refuges on 95 million acres. Many of the refuges are strategically located along the nation's four major migratory flyways – to provide convenient stopping points for birds that travel hundreds or even thousands of miles in search of food and breeding grounds.

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Besides providing shelter to millions of migratory birds, refuges serve as home to many resident birds. Refuges also team with plants, insects, fish, reptiles, amphibians, mammals and other animals. More than 50 National Wildlife Refuges were established specifically to protect endangered or threatened species. Today, more than 250 endangered plants and animals live on National Wildlife Refuges – including the gentle manatee in Florida, the American Bald Eagle, and various colorful, exotic birds in the Hawaiian islands. National Wildlife Refuges provide unparalleled outdoor activities – including fishing, hunting, environmental education, wildlife observation and photography – making them special, peaceful places for all Americans to connect with nature. Many refuges also offer opportunities for nature hikes, bird tours, wildlife drives and other activities. More than 35 million people visit National Wildlife Refuges annually, and there is at least one refuge within an hour's drive of most major cities!

The National Wildlife Refuge System's Centennial Celebration kicks off next week at Pelican Island, but that's just the beginning. All year long, refuges across the nation are inviting the American public to join their celebration and discover America's best kept secret....our refuges.

To find out how nearby National Wildlife Refuges will mark the Centennial Celebration, click on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Web site at: <http://refugedata.fws.gov/databases/events.taf>

For the Media: Events at Pelican Island, Riverview Park and Sebastian, FL, March 13-14

U.S. Interior Secretary Gale Norton and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Steve Williams will join local officials and a military band to dedicate a time capsule exhibit containing artifacts from National Wildlife Refuges around the nation. They will also celebrate the First Day of Issue of the Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge U.S. Postage Stamp.

For a complete list of media opportunities for advance coverage of the events, visit the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Web site: <http://www.fws.gov> Click on "news," scroll down to 1/30/2003 and select: "America's First National Wildlife Refuge to Host 100th Anniversary Celebration."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service

manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System comprised of 540 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fish and wildlife management offices, and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.